

Recovery During the Holidays

Mark A. Sanders, LCSW, CADC; Illinois State Program Manager, Great Lakes ATTC, MHTTC, and PTTC Publication Date: Dec 03, 2020

Americans celebrate many events with the use of alcohol and other drugs. Alcohol has a prominent place at weddings, anniversaries, graduations, birthdays, holidays, and even funerals! The holiday season between Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's creates a challenge for individuals working to maintain their recovery for multiple reasons. Seeing loved one's drinking can trigger drinking thoughts that lead to relapse. Many clients in early recovery have stated, "It seemed like everyone was having fun except me during the holiday." Other holiday triggers include financial distress, unhealthy family dynamics, disappointments of not feeling loved during holidays, and limited experience dealing with holidays drug- or alcohol-free.

Share the following recommendations with clients to help them maintain recovery during holidays:

20 Ways to Maintain Recovery During the Holidays

1. *The 24-hour plan (or Minute by Minute):* Each day of the holiday, choose not to get high that day without thinking too far ahead. If one day at a time gets too hard, take it an hour at a time. If that gets too hard, take it a minute at a time.
2. *Daily Dial-In:* Put your counselor on speed dial for regular holiday check-ins.
3. *Become a groupie:* Attend recovery support groups near your home during the holiday season.
4. *Make a "Top Five" list:* Five people you can call if you're craving alcohol or drugs. Let them know you will be calling them for support!
5. *Family function:* Ask for support from non-drug using relatives.
6. *Strength training.* Regular exercise is a powerful tool for building your recovery muscles and improving your fitness. Like drugs and alcohol, exercise releases dopamine and endorphins, the hormones that make you feel happy.
7. *Change your routes:* Avoid triggers by listing and staying away from places where you used to drink or get high.
8. *Connect with your sponsor:* If you have a 12-step sponsor, check in with them daily.
9. *Soothe your spirit:* Engage in activities daily that uplift your spirit, i.e., meditation, yoga, prayer.
10. *Write about it:* Keep a daily gratitude journal.

11. *Give back*: Volunteer your time or services during the holiday.
12. *Graceful exit*: If you are at an event and feel tempted to get high, give yourself permission to leave early.
13. *Mission statement*: Write a letter to yourself, entitled "This is how I plan to stay sober during the holiday." Mail it to yourself in a holiday card!
14. *Benefits Plan*: Write a letter to yourself on the benefits of recovery during the holiday. Remind yourself that you won't know the benefits until you experience them. There's so much to look forward to!
15. *Don't stay hungry*: Avoid HALT during the holiday getting too Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired.
16. *Talk about it*: Plan ahead. Predict high-risk situations and let your counselor know how you will deal with each situation.
17. *All hands-on deck (or Take 10)*: If you are craving a drink or drugs, wait 10 minutes, then 10 more minutes. Do something with your hands that takes you away from the cravings in your head: sweep the floor, vacuum, etc.
18. *Think it forward*: If you are thinking about using, think about how you will feel the next day if you're hungover or sober.
19. *Tune in, not out (or play it forward)*: Create your special recovery playlist. Include songs from any season that inspire you to maintain your recovery. Keep this playlist on your phone as a handy tool to turn to resist triggers.
20. *Walk about it*: The holiday season brings longer days and less sunlight, but a brisk walk in nature under a starry winter sky can restore your spirit.

Parents can help their teenager maintain recovery during holidays in the following ways:

1. Take your teen's recovery seriously.
 2. Be a role model. If you drink, avoid drinking in front of the teen who is working on recovery.
 3. Don't store alcohol in the refrigerator.
 4. Create new alcohol- and drug-free holiday rituals.
 5. Monitor the teen's whereabouts during the holidays.
- As recovery progresses, your clients will build the skills to generate their own drug-free holiday celebrations. In so doing, they can rewrite their family history forever while creating lasting drug- and alcohol-free holiday memories.